

Can The Dead Hear The Calls Of The Living?

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[This text draws heavily on "al-Aayaatul-Bayyinaat by al-Aaloosee and Al-Albaanee]

The Dead's Ability To Hear?

Do the dead hear what takes place in this world? This question is not subject to human opinions or speculations. It is a matter of the *ghayb*¹ that is encompassed by Allaah's knowledge, and may only be established through clear

evidence from Allaah's book and His Messenger's ﷺ Sunnah.

The true understanding in this regard is that the dead cannot, in general, hear what takes place on the earth. There are, however, exceptions to this general rule that are established in the Book and the Sunnah. We have to accept these exceptional cases and believe in them, without generalising them beyond their boundaries.

In this article, we will establish this understanding by presenting the proper evidence and, in some cases, refuting the wrong evidence used by some people to the contrary.

Comparison With The Deaf

Allaah ﷻ says:

"So, verily (O Muhammad), you cannot make the dead hear you, nor can you make the deaf hear the call while they turn their backs to you."²

In this ayah, Allaah ﷻ compares the dead disbelievers to the deaf people. This obviously indicates that they share with them the characteristic of being unable to

hear. Ibn Jarir at-Tabari ﷺ supports this understanding in his Tafseer (Qur'anic commentary) by saying:


"This is a parable meaning, 'You cannot make these disbelievers understand, because Allaah has sealed their hearing and has taken away their ability to understand the revealed lessons that are recited to them – just as you cannot make the dead understand by giving them hearing, because Allaah has taken away their hearing faculty.'


He is further saying, 'You cannot make the deaf hear after they turn their backs to you, because they have been deprived of the hearing faculty. Similarly, for those whom Allaah has deprived of the ability to hear and understand the aayaat of His Book, you cannot help them in hearing and understanding.' "³

¹ Ghayb or Unseen includes everything that is hidden from the people, of the future and past events, and what is not seen. Ghayb is exclusive to Allaah's knowledge and no Prophet had independant knowledge of it. From the matters of the Unseen are those pertaining to the Hereafter, Barzakh (life after death), Paradise, Hellfire, contents of the womb and secrets of the hearts, as mentioned in many Qur'aanic verses.

² An-Nam (27):80 and ar-Room (30):52

³ Tafseer at-Tabaree 21:36


At-Tabari then reported that Qatadah  said:
"Allaah gives this parable for a kaafir (disbeliever). Just as the dead cannot hear the calls, so the kafirs cannot hear. Thus He tells, 'If a deaf person turns his back to you and you call him, he would not hear you. Similarly, a kafir would not hear, nor would he benefit from what he hears.'" ⁴

This is also the understanding of 'Aa'ishah,  as is documented in the books of Sunnah.⁵ It is also the understanding of Umar and others among the Sahabah.

Those Who Are Worshipped Beside Allaah

Allaah  says:

"Such is Allaah your lord; to Him belongs the dominion. And those, whom you invoke instead of Him, own not even a qitmir (date pit's covering membrane). If you call upon them, they do not hear your call; and were they to hear, they could not grant your requests. And on the Day of Resurrection, they will disown your taking them as partners. And none can inform you better than one who is well acquainted with things." ⁶

The disbelievers used to worship a number of people who were righteous and noble during their lifetimes. After their death, Satan inspired their followers to commemorate them with statues. These statues eventually turned into idols that were worshipped instead of Allaah .


The above ayah clearly denies that those whom the disbelievers invoked instead of Allaah could hear them. The ayah does not refer to the idols themselves, but to the persons whom they were supposed to represent. This is clear from the statement, **"On the Day of Resurrection, they will disown your taking them as partners."** It is not the idols, which are irrational objects, that will be resurrected, but rather the actual people that they represented. There are many aayaat in the Qur'aan indicating that when Allaah resurrects the people, those who had been worshipped will turn against those who had worshipped them. However, there is nothing to indicate that the irrational objects will be resurrected as well.

Therefore, this ayah indicates that the righteous people, as well as those who are of lesser virtue, cannot hear after their death.

The Ditch Of Badr

THE COMBINED REPORT

Ibn Umar, Abu Talhah, and Anas  reported that, after the battle of Badr, the

Prophet  commanded his followers to cast twenty four of the most disdainful among the dead of Quraysh into a very filthy ditch in Badr. Then, as was his practice after victory, he spent three nights in the neighbourhood of the battleground. On the third day, he had his animal prepared for departure, and


⁴ Al-Albaanee verifies that this report has an authentic isnaad (chain of narrators) (al-Aayaatul-Bayyinaat p30 of the introduction).



⁵ Check al-Aayaatul-Bayyinaat pgs.7, 10, 14 etc

⁶ Faatir (35):13-14

then went and stood with his companions at the verge of the ditch. He called out the dead men with their names and the names of their parent saying:



"O so and so, son of so and so! O so and so, son of so and so!...Don't you wish that you had obeyed Allaah and His Messenger? Indeed, we have found our Lord's promises to us true; have you found your Lord's promises true?"

Whereupon 'Umar  (and others) exclaimed, "Are you addressing them after having been dead for three nights, and when these bodies have no souls in them?"


Can they hear? Allaah  says: **"Verily, you cannot make the dead to hear you."** He  replied:



"By Him in whose hand is Muhammad's soul, they can hear me NOW; and you cannot hear what I am saying better than they can! But they cannot respond." ⁷

THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SALAF



When this incident was mentioned to 'Aa'ishah,  she said, "The Prophet  only meant that they now realised that what he told them was the truth." Then she recited the ayah:


"So, verily you cannot make the dead hear you, nor can you make the deaf hear the call while they turn their backs to you." ⁸

Commenting on the above hadith, Qataadah  said:

"Allaah  gave them life in order to hear the Prophet's  words, as a reproach and scorn, and to make them feel the remorse and regret for what they did." ⁹

Ibn Atiyyah  ¹⁰ said:

"It appears that the incident of Badr constitutes a miracle for Muhammad,  whereupon Allaah  give them back the perception to be able to hear him.

Had Allaah's Messenger  not told us of this, we would have interpreted his addressing them to carry the meaning of reproach for the living disbelievers, as well as a reassurance for the hearts of the believers." ¹¹

Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani  said:

⁷ This is a combined report from three authentic hadeeths recorded by al-Bukhaaree, Muslim, and Ahmad

⁸ Recorded by al-Bukhaaree, Ahmad and others

⁹ Recorded by al-Bukhaaree and Muslim

¹⁰ He is a knowledgeable scholar of Hadeeth and Islaamic Legislation from Grenada, al-Andalus (Spain). He has a well-known book of tafseer called "Al-Muharrarul-Wajeez fi Tafseer il-Kitaabil-Azeez. He died on 542H

¹¹ Al-Qurtubi's Tafseer 13:232

"Ibn ut-Teen said, 'There is no conflict between Ibn 'Umar's hadith (of the Ditch) and the aayah. There is no doubt that the dead cannot hear. But Allaah may enable that which does not normally hear to hear....' " ¹²

THE PROPHET'S APPROVAL

It is important to point out that the Prophet ﷺ approved of the understanding of 'Umar and others among the Sahabah that the dead cannot hear. We should assume that these companions have previously gained this understanding from

the Prophet ﷺ - otherwise, they would not have hastened to object to his action of addressing the dead. And even if we assume that they were hasty in

objecting without knowledge, it would then be the Prophet's ﷺ obligation to clarify to them their misconception. However, he did not do any of that, but only indicated that those specific dead people were able to hear him at that specific

time. Thus it is obvious that he ﷺ approved of their general understanding in regard to this issue.

And 'Aa'ishah's ﷺ above statement shows that she had a similar understanding to that of 'Umar and the other Companions.

WRONG CONCLUSION

This is important to emphasise, especially when we realize that some scholars misinterpret this incident of the Ditch. They use the Prophet's ﷺ statement,

"You cannot hear me better than they can,"

as a proof that the dead always hear what goes on around them. They often

neglect the fact that he ﷺ has approved of their understanding and did not object to it. Thus, they turn the exceptional case, which was a miracle granted to

the Prophet ﷺ in that situation, into a general case conflicting with the clear texts of the Qur'aan!

A SUNNAH OF THE PROPHETS


It is interesting to indicate that addressing the disbeliever after they have been destroyed by Allaah ﷻ is an old practice of the Prophets. For instance, Allaah ﷻ says in regard to the people of Saalih:

"So the earthquake seized them, and they became in their homes (corpses) fallen prone. He (Saalih) turned away from them and said, "O my people! I have certainly conveyed to you the message of my Lord and advised you; but you do not like advisers." " ¹³

Ibn Kathir commented on this by saying:



¹² Fathul Baaree 3:182

¹³ Al-A'raaf (7):78-79


"This is a rebuke from Saalih  to his people after Allaah had destroyed them because of their disobeying him, rebelling against Allaah, rejecting the truth, and turning away from the guidance. Saalih said this to them, after their destruction, rebuking and reprimanding them; and they heard him, as has been reported in the two Saheehs (Al-Bukhari and Muslim)..."


He then cited the hadith of the Ditch. Note that the Qur'aanic text does not express that they heard Saalih. But Ibn Kathir assumed this based on the similar situation of the Ditch.

THE ROAMING ANGELS


Ibn Mas'ud  reported that the Prophet  said:

"Allaah has angels that roam over the earth, delivering to me the salaam from my Ummah." ¹⁴

Similar to this hadeeth there are other authentic hadiths which clearly indicate that the Prophet  cannot independently hear the salam of the Muslims, but needs angels to deliver it to him. This implies that he cannot hear other things as well. Also, the text of this hadith is general and makes no distinction based on distance.

Thus, if Allaah's Messenger  cannot hear after his death what goes on the earth, this should apply more appropriately to those who are lesser than him.

HEARING THE FOOTSTEPS OF HIS COMPANIONS

An important evidence used by those who believe that the dead hear what goes on the earth is the Prophet's  description in the long hadith of al-Baraa' Bin 'Aazib:

"He hears the thumping of his companions' shoes as they walk away from his grave."

However, this clearly applies to the time when the dead person is put into his grave and the angels come to question him. It cannot be generalised to other cases. This is the only way to reconcile between the general meaning of the above ayah (as understood by 'Umar, 'Aa'ishah, and other companions) and this hadeeth.

¹⁴ Recorded by Abou Daawood and others. Verified to be authentic by al-Albaanee (al-Aayaatul-Bayyinaat p43)